

Nationless

Anti-Broadcast

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Summary

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Description:

Burmecia has fallen. Cleyra has been destroyed. It seems all is lost. But there's still the matter of the young prince.

1. Nationless

FF9 Challenges

Authors Notes: FFIX Authors came together on Discord to pick one main character and a scenario for their fellow writers as a challenge to write a one-shot. If you're interested in this challenge or would like to join the Discord of the FFIX author fandom, send me a message!

Nationless

The dark ruminating clouds disappeared as quickly as they had set across the sky. What was utter dread and the looks of a dreary future had melted away back to the beautiful day of cerulean blue skies. But not all had gone back to normal. Dark plumes of smoke swirled upwards and slowly, ash began to descend down. In the thick sand, leading towards what once used to be a prosperous and happy tree village, now only lay fragments of the energy there used to be. Chunks of stone. Shreds of fabric. Remnants of peoples lives. A shifting was heard amidst the silent chaos raining down and spiraling upwards. A small figure, shaking from every joint, slowly approached the flattened ground.

His gleaming eyes pierced from beneath the brim of his tattered and fraying orange knit cap. How could this happen? How could this possibly be real? The small boy was no stranger to loss. But even then, this felt like the ultimate slash across his heart in spite of everything. The ash clung to his hat, his overalls, and gloves. Slowly, he brought his jagged paws out, watching the clumps gather in his palms. He tilted his head back, looking in the direction of clear plains that were sorely misplaced. The young boy glanced over his shoulder, grounding his gnarled teeth together, as he watched an airship disappear over the mountain range. A fire was growing in his belly. He felt his muscles growing taut.

“Puck.” He was startled in that moment, looking forward again. Sir Fratley stood with his spear set against his shoulder as, behind him, the plumes of smoke continued to rise. “I’m glad to see you’re alright.”

“Yeah, at what cost?” Puck said darkly, turning his palm to empty the ash to the ground. ‘I don’t see a damned thing to be happy about. Look around us, Fratley.’ The lost Dragoon’s eyes were slow to sift through the scene of chaos that surrounded them. The ash rained down endlessly and the air was

becoming more and more parched by the moment. As Puck stared right through where the tree of Cleyra should have been, he could only feel his temperature rising. “Cowards! All of them! Freaking cowards!” Puck kicked his boot against the ground, sending grains of sand everywhere.

“Calm down,” Fratley said, turning to also look at the crater of what was once Cleyra. “Projecting your emotions and energy in this way is not sustainable, and frankly, a waste of your time.”

“*Calm down?!*” Puck echoed, throwing his arms out at his side. “Tell me how the hell I’m supposed to *calm down?!* Burmecia has fallen. Cleyra has been obliterated. My father is *dead*, Fratley!”

Fratley was silent for a few moments as he tugged at his tattered hat and drove his spear into the darkening sand. “People will always answer for their actions. That is, if you hold them accountable.”

“I don’t have time for your riddles,” Puck sneered. He turned decisively and began marching away. His entire body was waxing and waning between utter hurt and unfathomable anger.

“Where are you going?”

The young prince stamped his feet to the ground, his veins pulsating. “Away from all of *this*! I don’t freaking know! I have no where to go, no where to be, but all I know is that I just want to be away from this total.... *Bullshit!*”

“Well, you are walking in the direction of Burmecia,” Fratley pointed out. Puck stood with his back to the long lost friend, his body as tense as a statue. “I bet there are still some survivors left behind, hidden beneath the rubble and in hiding spaces the minds of Alexandria could never dream to penetrate. You should return and heed a calling; one of revenge, one of tactics... One of hope. This event does not stop us, Puck. It only makes us stronger.”

“Your optimism and honor never ceases to annoy me,” Puck crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “We can’t be stronger than anybody if less than a third of our civilization remains. And even then, I think I’m bein’ generous with that number. It’s a lost cause, Fratley. There’s nothing more to fight for. All we can do now is suffer in silence and watch the world move on without us.”

“It sounds like you’re just going to lay in the sand with the remains of Cleyra and take it all lying

down,” Fratley could only shrug now. His feet sifted through the ash beneath him as he came to stand beside the young prince. “That certainly does not sound like the Puck I was once acquainted with.”

“What do you even know about me?” Puck’s beady eyes pierced Fratley from beneath the brim of his cap. “If you can’t even remember Freya, you sure as hell won’t remember me.”

“You are right,” Fratley nodded, looking towards the mountain ranges that surrounded them. “Not everything is there. But in my time of being reunited with you, you have reminded me of your feisty nature. Your inability to follow anyone else’s lead but your own. You strike your drum to your own beat, Puck. And it would be a sore thing to lose now in this hour, when you matter most.”

“You know, I don’t think you’re really grasping the gravity of this situation,” Puck brought tightened fists to his side and held his shoulders back defiantly. “Whatever brain injury you’ve suffered is blinding you from all the facts at hand: Burmecia and Cleyra are toast. They’re *gone*, Fratley, along with every important person we revered.”

“And yet,” Fratley’s hand gently came to Puck’s wiry shoulder. “You remain.”

The young boy was practically riveting beneath the touch and his mouth twisted sourly. After a beat, he swiped Fratley's hand away and began marching off again. Hot tears were beginning to sting his eyes and he didn't know whether it was because he was upset, frustrated, or exhausted. All of those emotions swirled up inside him, creating a tight knot his chest. His stomach was beginning to pulsate and he was certain he was going to hurl his guts out right in front of Fratley. The hot desert sun overhead didn't reach him at all. Instead, he felt frightfully cold, like he was trekking through the Ice Cavern.

“Where are you off to?” Fratley called after him. Puck stiffly stopped and squeezed his eyes shut, his shoulders rising to his jaw. He felt his tears gliding through his short fur.

“Wherever the hell my feet take me, I don’t know!” Puck yelled, his voice bouncing across the open plains. “I can’t think right now and you’re asking me all of these stupid questions!”

“You know I am a Burmecian, too,” Fratley pressed his hand to his chest. “I understand what you’re feeling, Puck. But we must use these emotions for good. Not self-sabotage.”

Puck glared back in the direction of Fratley, who pushed his worn traveler cap up to observe the young prince. “If you were such an upstanding, prideful Burmecian, then where have you been!? You certainly weren’t here to protect the women and children. Or feed the poor. Or make the necessary repairs to uphold a living standard! You *left*, Fratley, and my dad had to do it all himself while the morale of our people continued to drop to a point Alexandria was able to make its move. You weren’t there. You don’t understand *at all*.” There was a silence. ‘It’s like you don’t even have emotions at all!’ Puck continued, his voice rising in octaves. “We lost so many bishops, we lost countesses, dukes, what have you! We’ve lost our *traditions*. Never again will we dance in the rain! Or strengthen the wind storm! And we don’t know if Freya or Vivi or any of the others even survived. *We’re screwed*.”

Fratley folded his hand together in a fist against his chest as he took all the words that were hurled at him. “*Fear not, for Burmecian’s are used to moody skies and gray backgrounds that offer no hope or strength. For a Burmecian’s courage and resilience lies within.*”

“Oh, don’t start with this,” Puck sagged his shoulders and let out a deep breath. “You know I’ve

heard it a million times from my dad.”

“A Burmecian’s heart always remains strong, even in times of the rain changing directions. They act on their moral compass and do not stand idly by. Brothers and sisters never suffer in silence. Our flaws are what we celebrate. Our devotion is what tethers us together. A Burmecian never turns their back on those in need. And they never look elsewhere for perceived greener pastures.”

“Knock it off!” Puck shouted. He was breathing heavily now, his jaw throbbing as he clamped his teeth down. “Learn to read a room! I don’t remember those writings ever confronting the truth of mass genocide, Fratley.”

“Those texts... are your guidelines, Puck,” Fratley said calmly. “They are what will lead you.”

“You’re asking me to be captain when the ship has already sunk,” Puck replied flatly.

“The Burmecian’s are historically touted as master carpenters, just as the citizens of Lindblum are of engineering.”

Puck shook his head, and surprisingly, couldn’t stop a cackle from erupting up his throat. He turned towards Fratley, shifting back and forth on his boots.

“Look, I get it. You’re a well-traveled, proud creature, with a heart on fire. But... you’re not very convincing. I really don’t have the head space for this, Fratley, so leave me *alone*.” And with that, Puck turned away and began walking, certain this time he wouldn’t stop to entertain any incredulous thing Fratley wanted to spew.

Eventually, his feet found the short, crunchy grass that bordered the sand of Cleyra’s territory. He walked with unending energy as his body had gone completely numb. Puck was glad his mind was silent in those moments as he wandered aimlessly, not even bothering to find any known footpaths. He didn’t know what was next. In fact, he really had little interest in even guessing or contemplating. As far as the young boy was convinced, life truly had no purpose. Suffering always triumphed, so what was the point, anyway? The world always got what it wanted, even if it was stealing from empty, torn pockets. Now, however, he was beginning to see the null effect of trying to have fun. It seemed like an impossible feat when unending doom followed over every person’s shoulder. Puck didn’t know how he would conform to his new nationless life. Though he had always been on the go before, it felt like a portion of him had been stolen. His identity was

obscured in a fog. Puck came to an abrupt stop and tilted his head back, peering between the dangling strings of his cap. He was right on the edge of the moody clouds that brought the characteristic eternal rain to Burmecia. His lips pursed together as he looked across the mushy plains. As he glanced about, his eyes caught the color of olives and he let out a long sigh as he peered up the incline beside him.

“Just can’t stay away from me, huh?” He called up the range with a voice full of agitation. “What, are you gonna follow me around everywhere now?”

“I am worried for you,” Fratley replied, knelt against the rocky edge.

“You have no reason to be. Just leave me the hell alone, will ya?”

Fratley was quite for a few beats as he gazed down at the young prince with knowing, searching eyes. After a moment, he scaled down the side of the range, sending pebbles and rocks in his wake. Puck’s face was not welcoming at all as Fratley came closer. “You are okay with all of our loved ones dying in vain?”

“Don’t you dare put that on me,” Puck’s voice was rigid now.

“These are only things to consider in the wake of the devastation,” Fratley told him. “If Freya did die, does she not deserve to be celebrated? Imagine, we rally the people. We prosper. We rebuild. And then every future generation sees a statue of a brave Dragoon who gave her all for her nation.”

“Y’know, it really sounds like *you* should be king,” Puck said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It would not be proper,” Fratley shook his head. “It has to be you, Puck. You will lead Burmecia to a brighter future.”

“You should get your ears checked,” Puck again began wandering away. ‘There’s nothing ‘proper’ about any of this anymore. Social order has fallen.’ Puck found himself drawn towards the coast where the sand was unmolested, crystal white against the slanted sunlight that fell over him. The ocean raged towards the land as it was tugged endlessly by the clouds of eternal rain. If anything, the scene of the forever tossing white capped waves were exactly what Puck’s mind looked like. When he heard the crunching of sand behind him, he groaned out loud. “I don’t understand why you won’t just leave me

alone! A lot just happened and I don't have any answers for you!"

"I only ask of you to look inward, Puck," Fratley said from behind him, staking his spear into the sand. A breeze came between them and Fratley's light hair lifted momentarily. "This is a very pivotal time in your life. Especially for a boy as young as yourself. You must look internally for your own answers. I understand that answering to anyone seems dehumanizing and a great task. But in this moment, Puck, you must ask yourself truly what you want."

"Some peace and quiet would be nice."

"Think again. And harder this time," Fratley urged. "Do not just blurt out the first quip you think of."

"If I humor you, will you leave me alone?" Puck asked, his eyes never leaving the sea.

Fratley's tall, slender body came to stand beside the young boy now. "I only ask that you try. I do not wish to be a nuisance."

Puck bit down on his tongue to stop the barrage of quick witted remarks he had. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, though, everything that

confronted him was one of pounding hooves, high pitched noises, and bright lights. Puck's eyes snapped back open and he took a deep, uneven breath as his nostrils flared. He wasn't expecting that to happen in that moment of silence. He tried again to do as Fratley asked and saw streaks of a fast horse darting past, a gleaming sword the size of an oak tree, and a face full of textures hard to discern. Puck gasped out loud now and staggered away, pressing a hand to his pounding chest.

“You have confronted the truth... the reality,” Fratley was still calm, watching the endless horizon before him. “You are now going through the motions of accepting what your eyes truly saw. As hard as all of it is worth believing, we must settle for the dismal feeling of it being true.”

Puck now resorted to remaining by Fratley's side and watching the ocean play tug of war with itself. It was in that moment, as the vicious memories clawed across his mind, that he was beginning to feel his heart strings tug and loosen, unfurling the beating organ into finally processing all that had happened. He didn't like the rush of feelings at all. Puck wasn't even certain the muddied emotions had a name. They mixed together uncomfortably in his body, like an untrained artist pouring mismatched colors into a

jar. What began as anger transformed into sorrow. The sorrow melted into despair. And that despair morphed into a feeling of loss and confusion. The desperation and sudden urge to not be forgotten was overwhelming.

“I don’t know what you expect me to do,” Puck finally said after an extended silence. “People want a leader. I’m not it. I don’t even know what direction to point.”

“You must listen to your heart,” Fratley told him. “It’s the only thing you can trust right now. It’s intentions are pure and you should not question it. Tell me, what does it say to do now?”

“I think... I’m finally ready to cry about it all.”

“Good,” Fratley grinned, surprisingly, and looked down at the young boy. “That means you care. And the first step as king is feeling all that your kingdom does.”

Puck stewed in his emotions until they started to make him feel antsy. In that moment, he wanted to tear himself out of his own body, away from all the misgivings and overpowering feelings. It all felt so unnatural to his normal stoic, cool behavior. Puck turned away from Fratley as his heart rate

accelerated and his breath shallowed. “I don’t think I can do it. I’m nothing like my dad. And I’ll never fill his shoes properly.”

“It’s not about being the carbon copy of your father,” Fratley said, still watching the ocean. “It’s about being you, Puck. And I know you are good at that.”

Puck slowly felt his muscles twitching, curling his hands into fists. “I don’t think I can do it, Fratley. It... doesn’t feel right.”

“New things often don’t.”

Puck again felt a wave of emotions that he could not control. He bit wildly against his tongue before he looked over his shoulder. “This is all so messed up! I hate this! I want nothing to do with any of it!”

He stamped forward until his feet felt the gluey characteristic sands of the outskirts of Burmecia. He drove his teeth together and batted his hands back and forth as he sunk into the land he had known most of his life. Eventually, the angered spirit died within him and again he only felt despair, tilting his chin down. Puck willed himself to look across the open plains, watching the slivers of rain shed down over the decayed Burmecia he had spent more than

half his life in. What could he have done differently, he thought. Was all of this a punishment for having the itch to leave? He thought he desired all the world could offer him. Everything he thought Burmecia never could. He was washed over with guilt as he thought about his father in his daily tasks, always alone in that large castle. Puck never thought to write. And when he did check in, he was passive to his father, shrugging his questions off. Even their last encounter was brief and cut entirely short by his immature antsy behavior. That last choice, however, had been the difference between life and death for Puck. But he regretted it more than anything. Subconsciously, he found his feet moving him forward and the mist of the eternal rain began to glisten onto him.

“Where are you going?” Fratley asked, now turning away from the ocean.

Puck was silent for a few beats as his body slowly relaxed. “Home. Or at least... what’s left of it.”

“You have made up your mind?”

“No,” Puck looked over his shoulder at the Dragoon. “I just want to go home. I think my answers are there.”

Fratley grinned and came to stand beside the young prince. “I will accompany you.”

Puck nodded and together they set off into the rain, not at all bothered by wet clothes or the chilliness of the sheets of downpour. They were innately Burmecians, after all. “The first thing we should do is gather everyone who’s left at the courtyard in front of the castle,” Puck said, looking up at the tall companion. “And... find whatever food that isn’t rotten. The castle’s basement pantry might still be intact. It’s hard to find. I doubt the Alexandrian’s would have even seen the door with a million torches surrounding it. Everyone needs a warm meal tonight. Maybe we can make potato chowder stew, y’know... to raise morale. How does that sound?”

Fratley was still smiling as he reached down to wrap his arm around Puck’s shoulders. “It sounds as if you’re thinking like a king, Your Highness.”

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